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Did We Head Off a Bloodbath In Iran?

The shah's generals were ready to seize power; a tough American faced them down

By Richard T. Sale

ON OR ABOUT Jan. 3, 1979, Air Force Gen. Robert E. (Dutch) Huyser, second in command of all U.S. forces in Europe, arrived in Tehran at the express direction of President Carter. By late 1978, it had become clear that Iran was coming apart. A series of general strikes had brought its economic life to a standstill. A military government installed by the shah in November had been unable to restore order. In December, 2 million followers of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini marched through Tehran's streets crying, "Death to the shah!" Riots broke out in Isfahan, then in Ahwaz, where an American oilman was murdered. On Dec. 24, the U.S. embassy in Tehran was attacked.

It was plain the shah's grip was growing very weak. On Jan. 4 he agreed to take a "vacation" and he appointed Shahpour Bakhtiar to head an interim civilian government. It was at this point that the stocky, heavy-set figure of Dutch Huyser appeared on the scene.

According to press reports at the time, Huyser brought with him the shah's last hope. Huyser's job was to marshal support for Bakhtiar and make sure that the awkward, shaky new government did not fall victim to a military coup. Huyser reportedly accomplished this mission and went home.

On Nov. 4, 1979, the first hints appeared that Huyser's trip may in fact have had a different purpose. Gen. Alexander Haig Jr., the former NATO commander and Huyser's superior officer, claimed in a private talk that Carter had sent Huyser to Iran not to help Bakhtiar but to hasten the shah's fall. The charge was soon echoed by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi himself. In December, in excerpts from a book to be published this month, the shah claimed Huyser had arrived in Iran "with the clear purpose" of neutralizing the Iranian army and thus aiding in his overthrow.

After two days of denials, a high Pentagon official confirmed that the shah's statements "are essentially accurate."

Huyser, now head of the Military Airlift Command at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., has refused to be interviewed. The following account of his mission has been pieced together from U.S. intelligence sources, former officials of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and high-level State Department and National Security Council sources.

The results of these interviews challenge previous ac-

We had been told repeatedly that the president's support for the shah was unwavering; that there had been a massive "intelligence failure" of stupendous proportions because the United States had not been able to interpret correctly the depth of popular discontent in Iran. We were also told that the Carter administration had had no contact with Khomeini or his representatives, and that the rise of the ayatollah had taken U.S. policy makers by surprise.

In the light of new information, none of these assertions would appear to be true. According to high State Department and Pentagon sources, the purpose of Huyser's mission was to "pull the rug out on the shah." These sources say Huyser's marching orders were:

1. To tell the shah that his days were numbered: a new day was dawning in Iran, the U.S. policy of support had changed, and he was "to see it our way" or economic pressure would be applied "until he saw it our way."

2. To tell the shah that he was to leave Iran immediately, since his presence was a continuing source of unrest among the country's top military leaders.

3. To stop any pro-shah military coup and clear the way for Khomeini's return by warning the U.S.-trained generals that if they moved to seize power the United States would cut off all aid.

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"By November 1978, our options had narrowed greatly," said a high State Department official who claims that "at a policy level" the return of Khomeini was under constant discussion at that time. There was apparently no other choice. "Any political compromise like Bakhtiar never had a chance," he said. "It was simply too late to save the Pahlavis."

Authoritative State Department sources claim that Khomeini was well known to Carter administration officials as early as March 1977, and that he was already looked on as the main opponent and probable successor to the shah.

"The shah's departure was being discussed as a serious option by early 1977," said a highly placed administration source, who named NSC staffer Robert Hunter as playing a key part. From the summer of 1977 on, military sources claim, U.S. intelligence reports in Tehran were accurately predicting that the shah would not survive. One group of military analysts, headed by Air Force Lt. Col. "Scotty" Wilson, forecast that the shah would fall by March 21, 1978, the Iranian New Year, and that the United States would be expelled from Iran shortly thereafter. "All reports went to Gen. Philippe Gast [head of the U.S. military mission in Iran], from Gast to the embassy's political officer, and from him to Ambassador [William] Sullivan," said one sensitively placed official.

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